

THEATRE REVIEWS

1942

INDEX

STAGE PLAY

	PAGES
Across the Board on Tomorrow Morning	252, 253, 254
All in Favor	380, 381, 382
All the Comforts of Home	280, 281, 282
Autumn Hill	314, 315, 316
*Beat the Band	204, 205, 206
Bird in Hand	200, 201, 202
Broken Journey	265, 266, 267
*By Jupiter	274, 275, 276
Cafe Crown	370, 371, 372, 373
Candida	301, 302, 303
Cat Screams (The)	270, 271, 272
Comes the Revelation	278, 279, 280
*Counsellor-at-Law	165, 166, 167
Count Me In	214, 215, 216
*Damask Cheek (The)	195, 196, 197
*Eve of St. Mark (The)	211, 212, 213
First Crocus (The)	397, 398, 399
Flowers of Virtue (The)	354, 355, 356
*Great Big Doorstep (The)	160, 161, 162
Guest in the House	336, 337, 338
Harlem Cavalcade	296, 297, 298
Heart of a City	346, 347, 348
Hedda Gabler	358, 359, 360, 361
Hello, Out There	225, 224, 225
I Killed the Count	248, 249, 250
*Janie	244, 245, 246
Jason	377, 378, 379, 380
Johnny on a Spot	391, 392, 393
Johnny 2X4	326, 327, 328
Keep 'Em Laughing	306, 307, 308
Kiss for Cinderella (A)	332, 333, 334
Lady Comes Across	388, 389, 390
Laugh, Town, Laugh!	268, 269, 270
Let Freedom Sing	216, 217, 218
Life of Reilly (The)	298, 299, 300
*Lifeline	155, 156, 157

STAGE PLAY

	PAGES
Lily of the Valley	365, 366, 367, 368
Little Darling	190, 191, 192
Magic	223, 224, 225
Moon Is Down (The)	318, 319, 320
Morning Star (The)	239, 240, 241
Mr. Sycamore	179, 180, 181
Nathan the Wise	321, 322, 323
New-Priorities of 1943	236, 237, 238
Papa Is All	394, 395, 396
*Pirate (The)	162, 163, 164, 165
Plan M	342, 343, 344
Porgy and Bess	373, 374, 375, 376
Priorities of 1942	329, 330, 331
*R. U. R.	152, 153, 154
Rivals (The)	384, 385, 386, 387
*Rosalinda	187, 188, 189
*Show Time	234, 235, 236
*Skin of Our Teeth (The)	173, 174, 175, 176
Solitaire	262, 263, 264, 265
*Star and Garter	262, 263, 264
*Strip for Action	220, 221, 222
Talking to You	252, 253, 254
The Strings, My Lord, Are False	287, 288, 289
They Should Have Stood in Bed	349, 350, 351
This Is the Army	258, 257, 258, 259
Three Men on a Horse	209, 210
Time, the Place and the Girl (The)	198, 199, 200
Top-Notchers (Keep 'Em Laughing)	306, 307, 308
*Uncle Harry	284, 285, 286
Under This Roof	339, 340, 341
Vickie	230, 231, 232
Walking Gentleman (The)	292, 293, 294
What Big Ears	309, 310
Wine, Women and Song	226, 227
*Without Love	182, 183, 184
*Yankee Point	168, 169, 170
Yesterday's Magic	312, 313, 314

PRODUCTIONS CONTINUING

Reviews appeared in the 1941 CRITICS' THEATRE REVIEWS

1941 Vol.

STAGE PLAY

	PAGES
*Angel Street	182, 183, 184, 185
*Arsenic and Old Lace	417, 418, 419, 420
*Blithe Spirit	237, 238, 239, 240
*Claudia	378, 379, 380, 381
*Junior Miss	211, 212, 213, 214

1941 Vol.

STAGE PLAY

	PAGES
*Let's Face It	249, 250, 251, 252
*Life With Father	489, 490, 491
*My Sister Eileen	445, 446, 447
*Native Son	349, 350, 351, 352
*Sons o' Fun	193, 194, 195, 196

*Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play during the week of December 7, 1942.

†"Lifeline" opened Monday, November 30th, at the Belasco Theatre.

†"R. U. R." opened Thursday, December 3rd, at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre.

THEATRE REVIEWS IS A COMPLETE GUIDE AND RECORD TO THE NEW YORK SHOWS

Critics' Theatre Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York papers

NEW YORK SUN
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM"

NEW YORK TIMES
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
NEW YORK JOURNAL AMERICAN

Place this week's reviews with preceding weekly reviews so as to have always an up to date file of the New York Stage.

Published by

CRITICS' THEATRE REVIEWS, 235 East 22nd Street, New York, N. Y.

Yearly Subscription
\$15.00

"R.U.R."

NEW YORK POST
December 4, 1942

Karel Capek's "R. U. R." Revived at the Barrymore Theatre

By WILLELLA WALDORF

"R. U. R." the robot play, first produced here by the Theatre Guild twenty years ago, was revived last night by the Messrs. Silberman and Blank at the Barrymore Theatre. Its argument against regimentation seems particularly apropos at the present time, and the program carries a quotation from President Roosevelt: "It is the young, free men and women of the United Nations, and not the wound-up robots of the slaves states, who will mold the shape of the new world."

Although "R. U. R." had a successful run when it was first presented here in 1922, and was revived briefly by the Guild in 1936, this reviewer had never seen the play until last

night. It struck us as an interesting, sometimes exciting work, but by no means the sensationally brilliant creation, either as drama or as social and political propaganda, we had been led to expect from the furor it caused when the Guild first imported it from Continental Europe.

Then, beyond a doubt, it was its novelty that must have recommended it to Broadway audiences, for although it is melodramatic in parts and the ultimate revolt of the robots can make a terrifying stage picture, the play is often rather stilted and generally superficial in its discussion of the social problems raised by the wholesale manufacture of a mechanical man whose purpose is to do the work of the world.

Hard Going for the Actors

"R. U. R." is generally hard going for its actors, and last night's company seemed to become progressively more uncomfortable and inclined to overplay. The first act in the general manager's office went off fairly well, but as the robots began to feel their power and the relatively few humans on Mr. Capek's imaginary island of the future saw the mechanical mutineers closing in on them, play, and performance, seemed exaggerated and less effective.

The final charge of the robots and the demise of all of the humans but one that winds up the third act had some noisy excitement about it, but our interest in the drama waned steadily as the evening wore on.

The epilogue wherein the author shows Mr. Alquist, the only human being left on earth after the robots take over, trying to help his captors find out how to reproduce themselves, seemed curiously sentimental and weak after what had gone before. The scene, wherein a young robot and robotess discover Love, and are thereupon hailed by Mr. Alquist as Adam and Eve, brought the curtain down a little foolishly after so much ruthless carnage. It seemed a bit like one of those "happy" endings tacked on to send everybody home in good spirits.

Fantastic Scenery

Boris Aronson has designed some fantastic modernistic scenery for the production and Lee Strasberg has managed to keep the play moving for at least the first part of the evening, but there is very little of the tense quality that should be present in the final acts, when the humans are awaiting extermination at the hands of the robots.

Of the actors, Hugo Haas had some quietly effective moments as Mr. Alquist, the simplest of the humans, who is spared by the robots because he is a worker like themselves, and Gordon Oliver was handsomely earnest as the general manager who marries Helena Glory. Edith Atwater as Helena was attractive as usual but inclined to writhe unduly as the situation became increasingly dangerous. Of the robot population, Sydney Smith turned in a moving performance as Radius, leader of the revolt.

NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
December 4, 1942

"R. U. R." Is Still an Interesting Novelty But a Puzzling Drama

"R.U.R." drama by Karel Capek, in an English version by Paul Selver. Revived by David Silberman and L. Daniel Blank at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre, New York, Dec. 3, 1942.

★ ★+

By BURNS MANTLE

THE Theatre Guild was beginning its fifth season at the Garrick Theatre when it produced Karel Capek's fantastic melodrama called "R.U.R." in October, 1922. It had become popularly established with a growing list of subscribers, and it had two outstanding foreign importations to its credit, Molnar's "Lilom" and Andreyev's "He Who Gets Slapped."

Many of us were quarreling with the Guild in those days because its directorate appeared set on producing only foreign plays. The Guild was answering the complaint by saying that (1) foreign plays were much more interesting, and (2) they had so far failed to find any American scripts that they considered worthy of production.

That was some time before they discovered Eugene O'Neill and Sidney Howard. And they were partly right. The foreign theatre was producing more weirdly interesting dramatic experiments than the American theatre, largely because only a partly subsidized theatre could afford such experiments.

Ran All Season

"R.U.R." pleased the Guild subscribers greatly and, after several weeks at the Gar-

rick, it was moved uptown to the Fulton, where it continued to run until a total of 184 performances was its record. Eight years later the play was revived by the Guild, but withdrawn after a week's playing.

Last night at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre, "R.U.R." (Rossum's Universal Robots) was again revived by David Silberman and L. Daniel Blank. This time it has again been well staged by Lee Strasberg in settings by Boris Aronson.

If it seemed less unique as an exhibit, and less forceful as melodrama last night than it did 20 years ago, allowance must be made for the effect of first impressions. Also it must be remembered that there have been many experimental agencies in the theatre during the last 20 years. The impact of novelty has been pretty well worn down.

Neither do I believe that bringing the Capek play up to date has helped it. In the original version the Rossum robots were manufactured by a little group of scientists on a far off island.

From Ships to Planes

Their only contact with the world was by ship and the exportation of thousands of robots a year was an adventuresome business. Now communication is by air and the feeling of a mysterious remoteness is lost.

It is possible still to read symbolic meanings into the experiment of over-ambitious humans to people the world with mechanized and regimented robots (at least we have the play to thank for the coining of the word) and thus create an aristocracy of idlers supported by a population of serfs.

But we are in the midst of a great war of protest against such ambitions, and our confidence of ultimate victory dulls the edge of imaginations that twenty years ago could be easily excited by the suggestion.

It was the humanizing of the robots to such a degree that they came to feel pain, and through pain to struggle for relative happiness and to achieve synthetic hearts and souls, that gave them the power to wipe the human race from the face of the earth.

And it is the growth of their souls again that sends two of the younger robots forth in the end to serve the world as a new Adam and a new Eve.

There are good performances by Edith Atwater and Gordon Oliver as the chief commentators of Rossum's island. And good support by such experienced actors as Louis Hector, Horace Braham, Reginald Mason and Hunter Gardner.

The Aronson settings are more weirdly modernistic than we recall Lee Simonson's to have been, but they are decidedly colorful. Mr. Strasberg's direction puts stress on the uncanny robot mystery. "R. U. R." again is for subscribers to the unusual.



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years!

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future reference!

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Critics'
THEATRE REVIEWS

"R. U. R."

NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM"
December 4, 1942

After 20 Years Robots Seem Tame

By LOUIS KRONENBERGER

AFTER 20 years, *R. U. R.* still seems a brilliant idea, but a pretty slow and halting play. Perhaps it always was. (I read it long ago, but never saw it until last night.) Twenty years back, however, Capek's central idea—of man creating the robots who eventually destroy him—carried with it a far greater force. Since then a whole literature has arisen at the expense of the Machine, and the robot, while becoming a commonplace of our vocabulary, has lost its grip on our imagination.

In the present production they are plainly trying to sound a kindly note by suggesting an analogy between Capek's robots and Hitler's puppets; and at moments the play does

lend itself to such interpretation. But on the whole it only loses from being saddled with a political symbolism it never was meant to have. Its implications are economic, and its target is the whole modern world. Man, exploiting the machine for his baser desires, is destroyed by carrying his exploitation too far. To the idealistic young manager of the robot factory, these creatures, by doing mankind's work for him, are to liberate mankind—give everyone enough leisure, enough sustenance, enough comfort. But the stockholders are greedy for dividends; the big boys are executives of the robot factory, they can fight their wars and kill their enemies. By a stroke of irony, it is the humanitarian daughter of the owner who accomplishes the ruin of the robots, turning more and more human, acquiring the finer impulses that will turn them into men.

In the theater, too much of this is dialectical and too little of it dramatic. Capek never quite found a way of giving his idea flesh and blood. The stagecraft is pretty clumsy. The dialogue is consistently dull. The executives of the robot factory, with one or two exceptions, are neither very substantial human beings nor very sharp satiric types. Perhaps the penalty of a play about robots is that it should not seem human enough.

"R. U. R."
A play in three acts and an epilogue by Karel Capek. English version by Paul Selver; directed by Lee Strasberg; settings by Boris Aronson; revived on December 2, 1942, at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre by David Silverman and L. Daniel Blank. The cast:
Harry Domin.....Gordon Oliver
Sulla.....Gudrun Hansen
Marius.....Lewis Wilson
Helena Glory.....Edith Atwater
Dr. Gall.....Horace Braham
Mr. Fabry.....Hunter Gardner
Dr. Hallemeier.....Louis Hector
Mr. Alquist.....Hugo Haas
Consul Busman.....Reginald Mason
Nana.....Marie Louise Dana
Radius.....Sydney Smith
Helena.....Katharine Balfour
Primus.....Wendell K. Phillips
Robot.....Loy Nelson

Perhaps that is even its point. But the writing, at least, should be more vigorous.

Since there is little chance anyone to act, not much can be said of anyone's acting. Louis Hector, Reginald Mason, Hugo Haas, and Gordon Oliver did well enough. In a hopeless role, there was little that Edith Atwater could do.

NEW YORK TIMES
December 4, 1942

'R. U. R.,' or the Revolt of the Robots, Has a Revival at the Ethel Barrymore

By LEWIS NICHOLS

SINCE quite clearly the world now is engaged upon a final war between the men and the robots, it has occurred to the Messrs. Silverman and Blank to revive the late Karel Capek's "*R. U. R.*" This is the social satire in melodramatic form which gave to the English language the word robot. It was offered by the Theatre Guild in 1922 as one of the first serious plays to come out of Europe. It was revived eight years later and while it has been done by many little theatres across the land since then last evening's version at the Barrymore was the first Broadway has seen of it since 1930. And, sadly enough, despite careful staging, it seems dated and not a little slow.

The fault must lie in the play itself, for nothing has happened since 1922 to suggest that Capek's essential satire on the mechanization of man belonged only in the history of twelve years ago. A look at the headlines and at Europe proves otherwise. Some of the lines might have been written yesterday, though they were not; such sentences as "The robot soldiers spare nobody in the occupied countries. They have assassinated over 700,000 citizens." But the play lacks characterization, the humans being more typed than the robots, and it has dialogue that seems stilted and unpointed now.

In his direction of the current revival, Lee Strasberg has preferred to accent the Capek play rather than its possible bearing on 1942, although there is a quotation from President Roosevelt in the program to invite attention to this December throughout the world, if desired. It is a line from a speech made last September and says "It is the young, free men and women of the United Nations and not the wound-up 'robots' of the slave States who will mold the shape of the new world." But having offered that, Mr. Strasberg does not press the point, assuming perhaps that as it always has, an audience can read into "*R. U. R.*" about what it wishes. There have been few script changes and those very minor ones. Mr. Strasberg has been honest with his play.

In the part of Mr. Alquist, the architect and

head of the Works Department of Rossum's Universal Robots, is Hugo Haas. A Czech player who has played it in various parts of Europe, Mr. Alquist is the nearest to being a completely human character, and Mr. Haas, in the later portions of the play especially, gives him considerable warmth and feeling. Edith Atwater does well by the part of Helena Glory and Horace Braham is the Dr. Gall who makes the final experiments in the creation of robots almost end of the world. Of those robots, Sydney Smith, as Radius, is reasonably terrifying in his realism. "*R. U. R.*" always has been a scene designer's holiday, but Boris Aronson, who designed them for last evening's revival, has done them with angular simplicity—which is the best way.

The story of "*R. U. R.*" is of the robots who are manufactured to do all the work of mankind, but lack the spirit and soul of man. Dr. Gall's experiments make some advanced robots, and out of them comes a leader, Radius, who demands power over others, and when the dictators collect all the robots and orders them to kill the humans. Only Mr. Alquist remains, and he cannot find the formula of Rossum, thus dooming the robots after their lives of twenty years. Finally a robot and a robotess discover they cannot live without one another, and they go forth as a new Adam, a new Eve. Curiously enough, this epilogue of discovery, which was frowned upon when the world was younger, last evening seemed the best part of it.

NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
December 4, 1942

R. U. R. Robots Come Back to Broadway

By BURTON RASCOE

KAREL CAPEK'S *R. U. R.*, which was unaccountably revived at the Ethel Barrymore last night, was a product of the postwar cynicism and despair (particularly in Europe) of the early 1920s. It and *The World We Live In* (usually referred to, in conversation, as "the insect comedy") which Karel Capek wrote in collaboration with his brother, Josef, were great novelties of the time, being spectacular examples of the new expressionist movement in art and literature, which in itself was a more coherent kind of dadaism. *R. U. R.* combined the expressionist technique with revolutionary social doctrine and was written as a bitter satire on capitalism.

When *R. U. R.* was first produced in New York in 1922 both time and circumstance were propitious. The collapse of the war boom had produced a depression; all continental

Europe was in economic chaos; the Fourteen Points (hope of the people of Europe) had vanished at Versailles; "the machine age" had become a bitter epithet of novelists, poets and dramatists as well as of the Marxists to explain the apparent ruin of civilization; the Communist revolution had triumphed in Russia and many were looking to Lenin and Trotsky to inaugurate a new Utopia. Besides all that the jazz era had set in America as a concomitant of youthful disillusion, bathos, glib, spokesmen and gaudy glam, and the jaded nerves of the period responded on a subconscious level to the bizarre, *R. U. R.*, at the time, was bizarre and modishly revolutionary in its social thesis.

Timing Is Bad

But the times have changed in these 20 years. At the present moment we do not hate the machines; we are thankful for them. We have no surplus manpower caused by labor-saving machines; we have a shortage of manpower. We have no overproduction of consumer goods; we have hardly enough consumer goods to go around. Even before the war most of us knew that the fashionable (literary) speaking denunciation of the machines was a cliché based upon a fallacious economic assumption, and the businessman now, instead of provoking cartoons of the days of Mark Hanna, is a rich doing signs on his wall, is more accurately pictured as Talburt pictured him yesterday—buried beneath thousands of bureaucratic questionnaires, with only his feet sticking out.

The revival of *R. U. R.* last night, therefore, had all the novelty and excitement of an attempt to revive 23-Skiddoo as a slang ex-

pression. I never saw a colder audience at any theater, and the chill had nothing to do with the weather outside. Quite a number of paying customers deserted their orchestra seats after the second act. The spectacle was, in every way, a frost in spite of the excellent settings by Boris Aronson.

A Woeful Misconception

Even the quotation from President Roosevelt, which becomes a motto, showed a woeful misconception on the part of the producers as to what the play is about. The quotation is: "It is the young, free men and women of the United Nations, and not the wound-up 'robots' of the slave nations, who will mold the shape of the new world." With that quotation the producers were obviously trying to give a particular political significance (United Nations vs. the Nazis) to a play that was, and remains, as now produced, a satire on civilization itself, including that of our own. The word "robot" in Czech simply means "worker," and the play is about a capitalist chemist who invented a formula for manufacturing workers at \$150 apiece, who would require no wages, to supply the capitalistic demands for cheap labor, and whose great profit-making industry finally produced so many robots that they revolted and destroyed all mankind except one man too old to beget his kind.

If any significance whatever is now to be read in such a creaky, outdated "novelty" it could only be labeled defeatist. Except for one or two exceptions, the acting was competent, but only two, Reginald Mason (particularly) and Horace Braham, brought any distinction to their roles.

"R.U.R."

NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
December 4, 1942

The Robots Again

By HOWARD BARNES

KAREL CAPEK'S celebrated fantasy, "R. U. R.," leaves much to be desired in its current revival. The play has weathered a quarter of a century tolerably well. It still has prophetic overtones and passages of symbolism which are as pertinent today as they were when the show was first done here in 1922. What is missing at the Ethel Barrymore is the lucid and integrated dramatic presentation which can make fantasy stand up at any point in the-

atrical history. The production is not so much dated as badly done.

As a matter of fact, the central theme of the Capek play has far more force today than it had when it was first presented here or in its revival some years later. It is no accident that the robots which dominate the action of "R. U. R." have edged themselves into our language—that they have led Roosevelt to state that "it is the free young men and women of the United Nations, and not the wound up 'robots' of the slave states, who will mold the shape of the new world." Capek had quite an idea in "R. U. R." It is still a challenging dramatic conception. One only wishes that it had been projected more imaginatively.

For this Silberman-Blank production is as uninspired a resurrection as you will often see. Although it has first-rate players in the company, it rarely strikes the spark of artistry that can be kindled into a flaming piece of theater. The first act, in which one is acquainted with the perils and potentialities of manufacturing men without sensibilities, drags intolerably. The action quickens when

the robots start to revolt, but it goes badly to pieces in the final scenes. As I remember it, "R. U. R." was an exciting piece of theater twenty or ten years ago. At the Barrymore, it is a pedestrian revival.

The English version of the Czech drama by Paul Selver is largely to blame for this unhappy state of affairs. The staging of Lee Strasberg and the acting do little to rectify matters. Scenes have been treated with the sort of awe that make for dull dramaturgy. Performances veer wildly from ardent melodramatic hocus-pocus to muted efforts to underline the obvious symbolism of the subject matter. Of the players, Reginald Mason is altogether the best, as the general manager of Rossum's Universal Robots who figures ways and means of buying off the revolting assembly-line beings who are about to destroy civilization. Edith Atwater, as the girl who wants the robots to have souls, is extremely ill at ease, and so are Horace Braham, who gives the machine boys a shot of soul, and Hugo Haas, as an architect who gets to work for the man-made men. "R. U. R." should have been far more provocative and entertaining in a current revival.

NEW YORK SUN
December 4, 1942

Capek's 'R. U. R.' Is Revived at the Ethel Barrymore Theater

By RICHARD LOCKRIDGE

IT HAS been some twenty years since the late Karel Capek provided an alarming glimpse into the future with "R. U. R.," which described in melodrama and allegory how the robots came to inherit the earth. This view of the future is still alarming in 1942 and on the whole seems rather more likely than it did in

the 1920s. So last evening's revival of "R. U. R." at the Ethel Barrymore is almost chillingly timely.

And, although the faults of the play show up rather more clearly than they did in the old days, "R. U. R." is still both exciting and absorbing. It has a funny little first act, in which the existence of mechanical men seems rather more probable than the behavior of the human characters. The plotting is curiously naive; you have to swear desperately to accept the author's thesis that the only recipe for robot making is jotted down on a few old sheets of paper, easily available to an emotional heroine who wants to burn them. And just what did come over the robots to make them rebel is not as clear to me as I remember it's having been all those years ago.

But the fireworks of melodrama are still there. You will tremble for the tiny group of humans besieged by the monsters of their own making during the final stages of the great revolt which sweeps mankind from the earth and turned it over to the mechanized regiment. And under the fireworks, as under the jerky story, there is a sensitive author's fear of regimentation, his passionate belief in the variability of the human; his hatred

of slavery and his knowledge that mastery corrupts. There was never a better time than now for the reiteration of such convictions, since now the human robots march.

Lee Strasberg's direction has rather emphasized the fireworks and, when the revolting robots storm the island factory where they are manufactured, the whole theater seems in danger of being blown up. More quiet might have been more frightening; a generally more fluid performance might have been hoped for. And Miss Katharine Balfour, the robotess who finds love at the end and so becomes a promise for the future, should have been persuaded to writhen a little less. All her children, one suspects, will grow up to be movie spies. And Boris Aronson's settings suggest that the future, while odd to look at, is going to be very uncomfortable to sit in.

But most of the acting is good. Edith Atwater is excellent as the last woman of our race; Hugo Haas is comfortably expert as the gentlest of the scientists; Gordon Oliver, Louis Hector, Reginald Mason, and the rest give admirable performances and Sydney Smith is impressive and frightening as the robot leader. "R. U. R." is still a compelling play, all in all.

NEW YORK JOURNAL AMERICAN
December 4, 1942

Revival of Capek's Play About Robots Tells Attack On Enslavers of Labor

By JOHN ANDERSON

SINCE the thought of creating mechanical men was merely an amusingly fantastic idea until Hitler spoiled everything by taking it seriously Karel Capek's celebrated play "R.U.R." seemed changed at Ethel Barrymore's theatre last night when it was revived 20 years after its first production. Actually it hadn't changed much at all, but the world had changed around it. The word "robot," first introduced in its title, "Rossum's Universal Robots," has not only been taken into the language, but has been used by the President to identify the inhabitants of the Nazi slave states. A robot is a synthetic zombie.

In the reasonably innocent days of its first production by the Theatre Guild, "R.U.R." seemed to be more of an economic than a political parable. Either way you take it, Capek, with amazing clairvoyance, is on the side of the angels. It is as good a stick to beat Hitler with as it seemed, years ago, when it struck out amidst the worries of a machine age with the force of nightmare melodrama against the enslavers of labor. In its largest sense Capek's target is any man who believes in faceless men.

Challenging Idea

By setting his scene boldly in the future, at a time when the manufacture of artificial non-human beings is possible on a large scale, the Czech dramatist heightened his parable by giving it a fascinating and finally terrifying sense of the macabre. His strange, ungainly automatons bring to the play not only the immediate terror of their presence, but they evoke, in their sullen relations with their creators, the dramatic overtones which make the play, in its idea rather than its execution, so challenging.

There is rare irony in the fact that the god-like humans have to give the robots nervous systems so they will feel pain. The threat of pain is the only commercial guarantee they can find to prevent the robots from harming themselves. It makes for efficiency. There is a terrific irony in the manufacturers' decision to quit making universal robots and make national and racial robots, so they will hate each other instead of their masters. There is stunning impact in the thoughts that the robots, in blind mechanical hatred, obliterate the human race and even the secret of their own manufacture, and there is ultimate, gentling reassurance when two young robots presumably genderless and sterile, discover that they cannot live without one another. It is then that the last man on a desolate and human-less earth says to the pair, with a final line that echoes back to the Garden of Eden, "Go Adam—Eve." Out of their own need (and presumably a slight mistake by their creator) the robots have evolved souls and know the secret of life and death.

Robots Believable

Since I have always looked back on the play with the happy recollection of my salad days of playgoing, I am a little abashed to discover now that these provocative matters are presented in a play that tumbles them on the stage prodigally, but without much persuasion of dialogue, without any style, and without the dramatic power to cre-

ate atmosphere or to sustain the imagination.

For in the translation, credited in the present playbill to Paul Selver (and in the original production to Selver and Nigel Playfair) there is not much real substance. The play holds the stage more by the force of its ideas than by the force of their crude statement. Many of its lines are embarrassingly empty and stilted. The human beings are scarcely characterized, and seem far less interesting than the creatures they created—a final cynicism Capek couldn't have intended.

In the present production the robots are almost the only believable characters on the stage, though even here the suggestion of supernatural melodrama and the excitement of inhuman menace are both lost. The awful climax, when the machine men seem about to trample the audience, goes for almost nothing in the noise and inept lighting of the scene. If Mr. Strasberg, usually a sensitive and perceptive director, had been thinking quietly, with a horrible shuffling sound to break the oppressive silence, he might have scared the daylight out of us.

Last Man Alive

In general, I'm afraid, this obviousness of attack has done a great deal towards lessening the play's effect. The cast takes it lightly and on the surface, Gordon Oliver lends no weight to the long, first act explanation about making robots, and Edith Atwater, obliged to exclaim the equivalent of "Oh" and "Ah" through the scene, lets it go pretty much at that. Louis Hector and Hugo Haas give by far the best performances, the latter in the desolate bewilderment of the last man on earth. Sydney Smith, Gudrun Hansen, Lewis Wilton, Katherine Balfour and Wendell K. Phillips enact the principal robots with appropriate woodenness proving, possibly, that one touch of wood makes the whole cast kin.

In spite of everything, though, "R.U.R." still seems a better play than it is, more evocative and interesting. It seems to have the use of powers it simply doesn't possess.

"Lifeline"

NEW YORK SUN
December 1, 1942

'Lifeline,' Melodrama of The Wartime Sea, Is Offered at the Belasco

By RICHARD LOCKRIDGE

THE heroism of Britain's merchant seamen, who slog their way doggedly across the Atlantic with cargoes for the war, is celebrated in "Lifeline," which opened last evening at the Belasco. But for one reason and another it is not celebrated as excitingly as it might be, and "Lifeline" will have to be set down, reluctantly, as another smallish play about great happenings. It reminds of heroism, but does not recreate it.

"Norman Armstrong"—who, in reality, is a couple of playwrights—has told of the voyage home of the Clydesdale, a 5,000-ton freighter out of Canada for England. The

action is confined to the ship's saloon; the characters to her officers and a few of her men. The Clydesdale carried gasoline and had cranky engines and a cranky engineer to run them. Her skipper was a bearded despot with a kindly heart; her first mate was a disgruntled officer who needed only responsibility to find himself again. She had a grumpily jovial steward and a third mate who was the owner's son, and a radio operator who was, although no one told him so, married to a prostitute.

On her way across the Clydesdale fell out of convoy and regained her place and fell out again. She sank a submarine, but was set on fire by planes. The crew abandoned her and found her again, still smoking but on the surface; the captain died, the steward and the messboy, who was making his first voyage, were among the lost; the survivors brought her into port. Such things can make melodrama, as well as history.

Here they make only rather familiar melodrama, with few of the usual ingredients missing and not many of the twists of plot unexpected. But the basic fault of "Lifeline" is, I suspect, that the characters do not rise out of the routine. These are the conventional men without women, doing and saying and feeling only the things the theater has taught us to expect. There is no fresh life in "Lifeline." It is a tribute to brave men, but it comes out of the stock bin.

Gilbert Miller, who imported it from London—where it has been doing nicely for

NEW YORK JOURNAL AMERICAN
December 1, 1942

Dudley Digges Stars in Saga of Tramp Ship Which Risks Perils of U-Boats

By JOHN ANDERSON

SINCE "Lifeline," presented by Gilbert Miller at the Belasco Theatre last night, is a tribute to the merchant marine, it is easier to accept it for its sentiments than for its drama. For while Mr. Miller has given Norman Armstrong's saga of the tramp steamer, "Clydesdale," the benefit of some fine performances and a shipshape setting by Lemuel Ayres, the play itself lacks the force and emotional power to do its subject justice. It has some vivid incidents, but it is static and undramatic.

No one, I suppose, at either end of the lifeline, can fail to feel the trans-Atlantic tug on the heartstrings as the trembling old tubs go

out valiantly into "torpedo lane" to risk the sinking perils of the U-boats.

The fact that the men take the drama as well as the risk of their vital jobs in their stride is part of the special heroism of wartime seafaring. But Mr. Armstrong has made the mistake of letting his drama take them in its stride, so that his chronicle, for all its efforts at quiet tension, loses its stage effect.

Quiet Heroism

There is obviously a theatre point where quiet heroism misses the heroic by becoming un-theatrical. We may all rejoice in the thought that such heroism is routine, as far as the men themselves are concerned, but as spectators at a play we have a right to expect the author to lift the routine above dullness and to give it the propulsion and impact of drama.

In spite of its factual events the story of the "Clydesdale" misses much of the excitement of a perilous voyage. The old ship's worn-out engines can't keep her in convoy. A U-boat stalks the oil laden vessel and is sunk. A second Nazi attack is more successful and the "Clydesdale" is swept by fire, is abandoned by captain and crew, and left a dangerous derelict. After drifting about for days in an open boat, the skipper and some of the men are able to get back on board, and she is brought safely to port.

"This is home," says the old man, "is sorely needed at home."

By using such under-statement throughout

'LIFELINE'

A play in three acts by Norman Armstrong; staged by Dudley Digges; setting by Lemuel Ayres; presented at the Belasco Theatre on November 30, 1942, by Gilbert Miller. The cast:

Casey.....	Dudley Digges
Ronnie.....	Bob White
Larry Oulton.....	Stanley Phillips
Peter Launder.....	Colin Keith-Johnston
Dennis Comber.....	George Keane
Fred Judd.....	Everett Ripley
Captain J. McGraw.....	Rhys Williams
Jim Lloyd.....	Whitford Kane
Ed Murgess.....	George Boots
Oppy Parker.....	Victor Becroft
Dusty.....	Edward Hunt
Able Seaman.....	Michael Denis

months—has cast it with his usual care and skill. So we have Dudley Digges, Colin Keith-Johnston, Rhys Williams, Whitford Kane and Victor Becroft among those who work honestly and with cunning to breathe the breath of life into the author's characters. The acting is, in almost all instances, more than the characters are worth. Mr. Digges has staged it well, the fireworks of war are convincing. The setting is excellent. And the play is hum-drum.

Mr. Armstrong does create a tone of matter-of-fact, job-to-be-done heroism. In his direction Mr. Digges has emphasized this quality by under-playing the eight scenes and simply chopping them off with the curtain, instead of anticipating them in terms of stage pauses and clinching effects.

Honest Methods

Such honest and unvarnished methods would doubtless enhance a better script, but in "Lifeline" they suggest rather loose ends. For Mr. Armstrong's dialogue is not very pertinent, and his chief characters, though good enough as sketches, give the movement no dynamic power.

To play the four central parts of the master, the engineer, the first officer and the steward, Mr. Miller has lavishly assembled a quartet of familiar players—Rhys Williams, Whitford Kane, Colin Keith-Johnston and Dudley Digges. There is flavor to some of the writing, especially in the affectionate quarrels of Mr. Williams and Mr. Kane, and Mr. Digges lends the old steward the mellowed warmth of his most sympathetic playing. There are good smaller performances by George Keane, Bob White and Victor Becroft.

They are all plainly fine men on shipboard—salt of the earth and sea. It is Mr. Armstrong's fault that they are not as good on stage boards.

Their play drifts, its plot engines down, its dialogue becalmed.

NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
December 1, 1942

"Lifeline," a Dramatic Tribute to Men of the Merchant Marine

"Lifeline," drama by Norman Armstrong (Barbara Toy and Norman Lee). Produced by Gilbert Miller at the Belasco Theatre, New York, Nov. 30, 1942.

★ ★ ★

By BURNS MANTLE

"LIFELINE" is more a tribute than a drama; a tribute to the merchant navy that is courageously ferrying supplies and ammunition through coveys of submarines haunting the sea lanes of the Atlantic, rather than a drama of its relations' lives.

It has been beautifully staged and cast by Gilbert Miller at the Belasco Theatre. It is stirring acted by an all-male cast headed by Dudley Digges, Rhys Williams, Colin Keith-

Johnston and Whitford Kane.

It definitely puts you aboard a 5,000-ton tramp steamer and keeps you there for the duration of the adventure. Mr. Digges, who staged it, has made not so much as an awkward gesture toward a theatricalism that might have added a touch of romance at the expense of a really impressive realism.

Meet the Heroes

Going aboard, you meet the officers and some of the crew of the Clydesdale while she is in a Canadian port. There is Capt. J. McGraw, the master, a booming, bearded bear of a man with a Welshman's sentiment deep down.

And good old "Grandpa" Jim Lloyd, first engineer, who mistrusts his over-age engines and hates his job, yet couldn't be pried away from either. (Grandpa takes his knitting along when he goes to sea.)

There's Casey, the steward, whose philosophy has been built up from adventures on all the seven seas. And Ronnie, his raw apprentice, whom he bullies aboard ship and wraps protectively in his own great coat when the crew takes to the boats.

There's First Officer Peter Launder, a growing pessimist but a dependable fellow in a fight or a panic. And Second Mate Larry Oulton, who'll take a black eye in defense of any woman he fancies. And Third Mate Dennis Comber, whose father is rich, but whose character is forged. And Wireless Operator Fred Judd, whose wife's on the make, though he's the only one who never suspects

it. And 'Oppy Parker, who is washed up in a lifeboat after his own ship has been torpedoed.

Interesting Types

They are all interesting; all faithful to the drama and its story. But they are part of the ship's log; witnesses with documentary evidence to give. They hold your interest, but stir your emotions collectively rather than individually. It is individual conflicts that make drama.

The Clydesdale tags a convoy, getting inside it when she can, dropping out of it when she has to. Once her gunner bags a submarine that attacks her, and there is rejoicing.

Once she is set afire by a bomber, and all hands abandon ship. Three days later her second lifeboat picks her up again and puts out her fires. But her first lifeboat is lost; picked up seventeen days later with all who were in her found dead. They were some of our best friends, too.

All good performances, as noted. Digges' steward, Williams' captain, Kane's first engineer, Keith-Johnston's first officer—these are portraits deeply and skillfully etched.

Victor Becroft's 'Oppy, Stanley Phillips' second mate, George Keane's third mate, Howard Ripley's wireless operator, Bob White's scared galley boy—they are strong in support.

Lemuel Ayers' setting is a beauty, and off-stage noise effects are helpful. There were many curtain calls for the actors at the play's close. Which should mean something.

"Lifeline"

NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM"
December 1, 1942

A Good Subject Comes to Little

By LOUIS KRONENBERGER

BY DEALING with the British Merchant Marine, *Lifeline* enjoys an advantage over most plays about the war. Here is something new to the stage, with its own drabness and picturesqueness, its own drama and danger. For that reason, it is the more unfortunate that Mr. Armstrong has for the most part not done justice to his theme, not quickened it with

life, not warmed it with imagination, not streaked it with humanity. He achieved effects of sorts, but they are conventional ones. He achieved a kind of drama at times, but it smells of the footlights.

Lifeline—which has an all-male cast—describes a perilous trip in a tramp steamer from Canada to England. The Clydesdale runs into plenty of trouble. First it is attacked by a U-boat, which it finally sinks. Then it is bombed ferociously from the air and the crew has to abandon ship. Three days later part of the crew climb back on it and manage to lug it into port.

Somehow these crises, frequent as they are in real life, seem made to order. We are more conscious of the sound effect than of the horror and the heroism. They don't give the audience a shattering experience; they seem rather to shelter the author with climactic curtains. A more imaginative playwright could have described a voyage in which nothing happened, and yet created more cold horror from the idea that at any moment something might.

A better playwright would also have given his play more movement and continuity; in *Lifeline* many of the scenes, short as they are, seem to die of exhaustion. A better playwright would have made his people more real and less picturesque. Must a sea captain be gruff? Must an apprentice stumble every time he goes to the galley? Must, indeed, almost everybody have mannerisms to be interesting?

Some of the dialogue in *Lifeline* is momentarily pungent. Some of the shipboard activity has color. But one is never really stirred, or even absorbed. *Lifeline* is not implausible; it all might have happened. But one never has any feeling that it did.

Mr. Digges has staged the play adequately and acted the ship's steward with his unflinching competence. Rhys Williams is vigorous as the gruff captain, and as the ship's engineer Whitford Kane is excellent. Victor Becroft and Colin Keith-Johnston are in the main, pretty much what they usually are. But that is one of the penalties of a play which abounds in character parts rather than people.

NEW YORK TIMES
December 1, 1942

THE PLAY IN REVIEW

"Lifeline"

By LEWIS NICHOLS

IT IS to the heroes of the merchant marine that Norman Armstrong has dedicated "Lifeline." They have been mainly unsung and unrewarded; they have taken their old, slow and rusty ships across incredible seas to keep open the front for freedom. They have fought submarines and dive-bombers, and engines that are all but falling to pieces; they have carried their cargoes through unbelievable dangers and near disasters. Mr. Armstrong has the realization of all that they have done in their humble, quiet way, but he has not written a play up to their exacting standards.

Perhaps no one would be able to do that, at least no one has thus far.

"Lifeline" has its effective moments on the stage of the Belasco, and obviously Mr. Armstrong has a sincere wish to pay tribute where tribute long has been overdue. But due to the limitations of the theatre, the dangers that beset his ship from all sides and the action by which she overcomes those dangers can but be suggested; the screen, which also could show the submarines, the convoy and the enemy planes, could do the task more completely. And while the characters are types—many of them are excellently portrayed—they remain not clearly defined in relation to the ship on which they are sailing or the merchant navy for which they sail her. They often remain just individuals on a ship and not heroes or one of the bravest armies in the world.

The story of "Lifeline" is that of the tramp steamer Clydesdale. Slow and old and with a cargo of gasoline, it starts out for Liverpool from Nova Scotia. Not long at sea in convoy, its battered engines give out and it falls behind. A submarine approaches, but the old warrior sinks it. Later on, after it has rejoined the convoy, a flight of bombers comes over and sets fire to one of the holds. The captain orders the ship abandoned, but after several days in the boats some of the crew find the Clydesdale still afloat and clamber back on board. The engines are restarted and, with the bridge shot away, most of the crew mis-

ing and the rudder not working, she finally makes port.

The action of the play, which has been running in London since July, all takes place in the saloon. Its characters are the captain, to whom any ship is a castle and the merchant navy a master to be served with worship, and his officers and some of the men. His first officer is a cynical former master, who when he takes command after the captain is killed takes on his feeling for the dignity of the merchant marine. His third officer is the son of the owner of the line, who gave up the possibility of the Navy in order to be "a sailor." The second mate habitually picks up a black eye while on shore; the engineer is the captain's brother-in-law, but gets on with him, verbally at least, in the traditional manner of engineers and masters.

In producing "Lifeline," Gilbert Miller has found himself a distinguished cast. There is Dudley Digges—also the director—as the steward who looks out for the various whims of the Clydesdale's officers, and Colin Keith-Johnston, who is excellent as the harshly cynical first officer. Whitford Kane is a complete and portly engineer, Rhys Williams is the bearded master, George Keane and Everett Ripley are other officers of the ship and there is a nice performance by Bob White as an eager 16-year-old apprentice. Lemuel Ayres designed the setting, obviously with a knowledge of those old tramps which quietly are going about the business of winning the war.

Critics' THEATRE REVIEWS

Enjoyed when first received—

Valued through the years—

Treasured for future reference—

An Excellent Gift Solution

Critics' THEATRE REVIEWS

"Lifeline"

NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
December 1, 1942

The Merchant Navy

By HOWARD BARNES

HEROIC subject matter has had in different dramatic treatment in the newest of the war plays. "Lifeline," which has been playing in London for some months, celebrates the unsung warriors of the merchant marine, who have fought so gallantly against overwhelming odds. The theme itself gives the Belasco offering moments of melodramatic suspense and emotional intensity. Gilbert Miller's production and the fine acting of an all-male cast make the most of these flaming interludes. Unfortunately the drama as a whole is pedestrian and obvious where it might have been a stirring saga of courage without glory.

The authors of the piece, Barbara Toy and Norman Lee, who use the joint pen name of Norman Armstrong, have chosen a solid structure for their work. In contemplating the officers and crew of a little tramp steamer carrying petrol from Canada to England they have achieved a straight line of action and a variety of characters. In conceiving a fight with a submarine and an attack by a dive bomber they have evoked the full import of all-out warfare. But they have failed to clothe this material in the eloquence and power which it demands and deserves. They have not been up to the challenging requirements of their theme.

Comparisons may be invidious, but it strikes me that the Norman Armstrong team might well have studied John Ford's brilliant film, "The Long Voyage Home," before writing "Lifeline." All of the subtle suggestions, the depth of characterization and the overpowering suspense which made that screen study of the

merchant marine so triumphant are missing in Broadway's latest exhibit. Stage figures are concerned with conventional gesture throughout most of "Lifeline." Perhaps as a piece of reportage it is significant, but it does not have much dramatic stature.

It is no fault of the acting. Dudley Digges, in addition to directing the production with vigor and imagination, plays the unruffled steward of the freighter with expansive charm and authority. Rhys Williams is splendid as the crochety skipper, who keeps on trying to take the steamer through to England even after he has been mortally wounded. There is a stanch bit of performing by George Keane, as the son of the boat's owner, who wants to be where the fighting is roughest and Whitford Kane is immensely appealing as a veteran engineer. Colin Keith-Johnston is good as a complaining first mate who becomes a martinet when he succeeds to command of the ship and Bob White is fine as an apprentice. "Lifeline" has a stirring background and splendid acting. They make the play itself even more disappointing.

NEW YORK POST
December 1, 1942

"Lifeline," a Tribute to the Merchant Marine, at the Belasco

By WILELLA WALDORF

TO REMIND us of the heroic work of the Merchant Marine in wartime, Gilbert Miller produced "Lifeline" last night at the Belasco Theatre. It is a play about the British Merchant Navy that has been running in London for the past six months, and its subject is so impressive in times like these that it is a pity a more skillful dramatist was not turned loose on it.

"Lifeline" is not so much a drama as it is a gruff, laconic account of a voyage of the 5,000-ton tramp steamer, Clydesdale, from Canada to Britain with a cargo of petrol.

Unable to keep up with the convoy because of engine trouble, the ship falls back and is attacked by a submarine, which it sinks. But an enemy plane is more successful, setting her afire, smashing the bridge, fatally wounding the captain.

After three days adrift, one of the lifeboats sights the old hulk again. The survivors climb aboard, find the cargo intact, and heroically bring the ship into port, though a big wind or a bomb anywhere in the vicinity would have meant a crack-up.

The dangers and privations encountered by the sailors in "Lifeline" are so commonplace in Merchant Navies that they are taken as a matter of course by the crews who man the ships that deliver the goods. "Norman Armstrong," listed as the author of the play, is said to be pseudonym for two British writers, one of whom, surely, must have been pretty close to the sea. But neither is playwright enough to make this grim story of heroism the dramatic force it should be in the theatre.

An All-Male Company

The Clydesdale carries a crew of believable characters but the play they are in reads like a ship's log set down by a businesslike, unimaginative skipper bent on doing his duty but more engrossed in getting his ship to port than

in writing about what took place on the voyage.

Mr. Miller has done all he could to give "Lifeline" theatrical vigor and force. Lemuel Ayers' setting is shipshape, and Dudley Digges has directed lovingly every detail to develop some of the sketchily written characters.

The all-male cast is uniformly excellent. Mr. Digges amuses himself by playing the old Irish steward amiably. Rhys Williams shifts his Welsh accent to something approaching Scotch on this occasion and is impressive as the Captain, while Whitford Kane is delightful as the Clyde-side engineer who knits in his spare time and argues with the captain over the possibility of getting a few more knots out of the mess of scrap iron below decks.

Colin Keith-Johnston is self-contained and gentlemanly as the second in command, and there are good performances by George Keane, Victor Becroft, Stanley Phillips, Everett Ripley and Bob White.

A great play ought some day to be written about the Merchant Navies. In the meantime, "Lifeline" does its bit as a timely reminder of what goes on, night and day, along the sear lanes of the world, where men are risking their lives every second in a service that is as vitally important as the front lines, though not, perhaps, so romantic nor as highly publicized.

NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
December 1, 1942

Lifeline, a Sea Play Opens at the Belasco

By BURTON RASCOE

I THOUGHT of little Bobbie Bishop of Larchmont all the time I sat through "Lifeline," a play by Norman Armstrong, which was presented at the Belasco last night. Ten years ago, in the summer time, when I would be writing on my typewriter in the back yard little Bobbie would come up and sit down and wait until I took some time off, and then he would talk about himself and things and what he wanted to do and be when he grew up. He wanted to be a mechanic more than anything else and when I gave him some tools he would always be bringing me things he had made or telling me about things he had fixed up. After he had learned to be a good mechanic, he said, he wanted to be an automobile racing driver or maybe an airplane pilot; he couldn't quite make up his mind. I hadn't seen little Bobbie for seven years (they say he had grown up, was handsome

in a serious sort of way, was still a hard worker and had done good in school; and then one day I picked up a paper and in it was the first casualty list of this war. Bobbie Bishop's name was in it. He had gone down on a tanker that had been torpedoed by a submarine.

Merchant Marine Deserves a Good Play

When I went to the Belasco last night I was in deep hopes that the play would be a memorable one, if not about Bobbie Bishop and all the other Bobbie Bishops, at least about the service he, not I, was in. The Merchant Marine (whether British or American) deserves a good play about its part in this war. It is a dangerous service, and the men who die in it are war heroes as certainly as any who meet gallant death in the combat service. Often the men in the merchant service sail aboard rusty tubs or creaking tramps which have no armor plate protection from keel to bridge, no ack-ack guns to ward off bombers, usually with only a four-inch piece aft that is supposed to take care of enemy submarines. Often loaded with high-test gasoline, explosives and inflammable materials, the old ships make their way through submarine-infested waters, sometimes too slowly to keep up with the convoy. And an appalling number of them have been blown to bits by torpedoes launched from Nazi submarines. And the men aboard are noncombatants, common seamen, unarmed. . . . Common, indeed!

All of us, I think, went to the Belasco last night hoping to see a tense drama celebrating the merchant service in wartime. I was grievously disappointed and I think many others in the audience also felt let down. There is more drama in the preface of a little manual for merchant seamen, called *How to Abandon Ship*, recently published by the Cornell Press

for a dollar, than there is in the whole three acts of "Lifeline."

Situation is Dramatic Enough

Yet the author had a plot and situation which you would think would be a perfect setup for something as moving, say, as *Journeys End*. There are no women in the cast. The entire action takes place in the saloon of a tramp steamer that is loaded with petrol, bound out of Canada for the British Isles with a convoy it is too slow to keep up with. Five days later the engineer sights a sub and sinks same. Four days after that an enemy plane drops incendiary bombs on the deck, causing the captain to order all hands to abandon ship. After 10 days one lifeboat, containing the cook and messman and some other members of the crew, is lost, but the officers and survivors of another lifeboat re-board the derelict and make port.

You'd think that would make a play. Wouldn't you? Well, it doesn't. Not the way Norman Armstrong handles it. Attempting naturalism and understatement, the thing simply doesn't come off, even with a cast of veteran actors as Dudley Digges, Rhys Williams, Colin Keith-Johnston and Whitford Kane. The only time the play comes to life is in a ghastly line uttered by Victor Becroft, as 'Oppy Parker, a rescued seaman, who is always offering heavy odds in bets proposed by himself and winning. He had bet his partner in a lifeboat six to one that he (the partner) wouldn't survive the voyage. When he learns his partner cannot be revived, he says, "This is my lucky day" and tells about the bet. The line is a shock; but unfortunately the "day" isn't.

Dudley Digges turned in his usual fine performance and the others did well enough by their material. But you can't help feeling how infinitely better they will show up when, and if, this material is whipped into a movie.